Making a Sandwich in Afghanistan:
How to Assess a Strategic Withdrawal from a Protracted Irregular War

by Paul Rexton Kan

The dinner offerings at the dining facility at ISAF headquarters were not the best when I took a break one night from working with CJIATF-Shafafiyat. The general's military aid, a lieutenant, sat down at the table with a few slices of bread, some meat and cheese. I said, "That actually looks better than what I got". He replied, "Sir, if it's one thing the Army taught me, it's how to make a sandwich." This is an appropriate metaphor for NATO and US efforts in Afghanistan and perhaps an important corollary to John Nagl's "eating soup with a knife." Simply put, it means doing the best with what you have in the face of worse options. When it comes to the war in Afghanistan, most of the focus has been on the counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy and what it will mean for 2014 when International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) mission will fall to the Afghan Security Forces. To be sure, civilian decision makers will take into account the metrics used by the military as it undertook its assessment of success. But whether 2014 will be a "period" or a "comma" marking the international community's military involvement in the country will largely depend on strategic level considerations of politicians, and not purely the military metrics of an operational strategy like COIN.

All wars end. Yet when governments choose to end their involvement in an irregular war by withdrawing their military forces in the shadow of prolonged violence, they face a complicated set of propositions. When a superior conventional force has withdrawn from a protracted irregular war without achieving its initial political and strategic goals, decision makers and military planners often conceive their departure as a failure of will—military, political, national or a combination of them. After all, a war waged by a country with a superior military force is one that it was *supposed* to win and to win quickly. When quick victory is elusive, the reliance on the will to carry-on appears a natural "Plan B". President George W. Bush summed up this sentiment by stressing a lesson that he learned from the Vietnam War during a trip to that country in 2005: "we will succeed [in Iraq] unless we quit."[1] In the case of Afghanistan, President Barack Obama also emphasized the need for determination. "We are focused on disrupting, dismantling and defeating al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and preventing its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future....It will take time to ultimately defeat al Qaeda, and it remains a ruthless and resilient enemy bent on attacking our country. But make no mistake -- we are going to remain relentless in disrupting and dismantling that terrorist organization."[2] However, before the President's remarks, the communiqué from NATO and the

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[1] Michael Fletcher, "Bush, in Vietnam, Says Change Takes Time", <u>Washington Post</u>, 18 November 2006, A14.
[2] Statement by the President on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Annual Review, December 16, 2010, URL: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/statement-president-afghanistan-pakistan-annual-review

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Afghan government at the end of the Kabul International Conference on Afghanistan reflected the pivotal year of 2014 as a drawdown for ISAF. "The international community expressed its support for the president of Afghanistan's objective that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) should lead and conduct military operations in all provinces by the end of 2014."[3] It appears that the goal of the US and NATO is the withdrawal of troops, whether or not Al Qaeda is disrupted, dismantled or defeated.

Much has been written about how and why wars end as well as about how and why powerful nations lose irregular wars.[4] Moreover, there has not been a shortage of recommendations about how and why the US should leave Afghanistan. But, what have other governmental decision makers involved in other protracted irregular wars of the past worried about when faced with the prospect of a strategic withdrawal? Have these worries borne themselves out? Considering such questions reveal a type of strategic template for the discussion of what a military withdrawal from the conflict in Afghanistan might entail.

Common Fears, Shared Worries

No matter the country that has withdrawn from a memorable irregular conflict—the French from Algeria, the Americans from South Vietnam, the Soviets from Afghanistan and the Israelis from southern Lebanon—each government has grappled with the attempt to balance short term and long term considerations. Attempting to balance such considerations reveals an interplay of common preoccupations even though the strategic objectives of the superior power in the irregular conflicts were different: maintain continued sovereignty against an anti-colonial movement, defend a Cold War ally against communist aggression and insurgency, defend a sympathetic communist regime from violent internal challengers and force a guerrilla group out of a neighboring country in the name of self-defense. None of the cases is a precise match to the type of irregular war occurring in Afghanistan; nor are they similar to one another. Moreover, no matter how different the strategic objectives of the governments involved in irregular wars were or when the conflicts occurred, there were still common concerns over a nation's international prestige, questions about regional stability, worries over domestic political fallout, tensions in civil-military relations and issues of interaction with the regime that assumes control after the withdrawal.

These are also cases that "ended badly" for the withdrawing party. But examining the worst case scenario is important when considering a case as complex as today's intervention in Afghanistan. As the United States grapples with its fate in Afghanistan, the implications of past withdrawals lurk like a specter in the background. This study does not seek to explain how or why decision-makers finally decide to withdraw, nor does it describe how or why the US might end its involvement in Afghanistan in 2014. This paper does not delve into whether such a deadline is feasible or how and why the US should end its involvement. Instead, it provides the

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[3] "Draft Communique Sets 2014 as Target for Afghan Military to Lead", New York Times, 20 July 2010, URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/21/world/asia/21kabultext html?pagewanted=all

[4] See for example, Fred Ikle, Every War Must End, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Efraim Imbar Democracies and Small Wars, (New York: Routledge, 2003); Richard Betts, Conflict After the Cold War, second edition, (New York: Longman, 2004). Also, see Peter Wallensteen, "Armed Conflicts, Conflict Termination and Peace Agreements, 1989-1996", Journal of Peace Research, (August 1997); Michael Renner, Ending Violent Conflict, (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 1999); and Stephen Cimbala, Through a Glass Darkly: Looking at Conflict Prevention, Management and Termination, (New York: Praeger, 2001).

factors that have been a part of other previous withdrawals and thereby articulates the parameters that any reasonable assessment must take. Whether any withdrawal from Afghanistan will be "precipitous" or done "responsibly", all of the common concerns that were part of previous departures will inevitably be contemplated, assessed and balanced in one manner or another by those taking over the Afghanistan policy in 2014.

Concerns over International Prestige

A term like "peace with honor" is a tacit acknowledgment that some sense of national pride must be preserved when considering the removal of combat forces from a conflict that is not going well. National pride, honor or prestige is a strategic preoccupation; a nation's credibility with its allies and deterrence of adversaries are part of short and long term calculations. As French Premier Guy Mollet put it, "France without Algeria would be nothing."[5] Yet when confronted with the inevitability of Algerian independence and the end of French sovereignty, "what was most important to DeGaulle was that it be done well, and with *honor*."[6]

National leaders were often worried about what "message" they would be sending to the larger world by departing without having achieved their strategic objectives. President Gerald Ford was still preoccupied with how the US should deal with a collapsing South Vietnam even after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords: "I am mindful of our position toward the rest of the world, and particularly of our future relations with the free nations of Asia. These nations must not think for a minute that the United States is pulling out on them or intends to abandon them to aggression."[7]

Beyond the damage to the reputation of a nation's strategic resolve, larger ideological objectives are thought to be sullied by backing out of the ongoing struggle. Much as Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon fretted over how withdrawing from Vietnam would erode America's standing as the leader of the free world, many in the Soviet government, including Premier Mikhail Gorbachev when he first assumed office, were worried that a withdrawal from Afghanistan would damage its position as the vanguard of revolutionary socialism in the Third World.[8] The Israeli military believed that their "stay in Lebanon serves our struggle over the existence of Israel"[9] while withdrawal jeopardized the notion of Eretz Israel.

Questions about Regional Stability

A common refrain of those arguing against a withdrawal has been that "things would be worse if we left." Typically those "things" have meant the withdrawing party's geopolitical interests in the larger region surrounding the conflict. Questions were raised such as whether the country would remain stable in the aftermath of a withdrawal and what if any "spillover effects" there might be; which neighbors might become predatory and extend their influence within the country; will the region be entirely "lost" to the influence of the withdrawing party? There was also the troubling issue of "blowback" or whether the enemies might follow the withdrawer

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[5] Gil Merom, Why Democracies Lose Small Wars (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 90.
[6] Christian Fouchet, France's last representative in Algeria quoted in Alistair Horne, A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962, (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 379. Emphasis added.
[7] Address by the President to Joint Session of Congress, April 10, 1975.
[8] Geoffrey Jukes, "The Soviet Armed Forces and the Afghan War" in Amin Saikal and William Maley, eds, The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 83.
[9] Merom, 195.

home in the aftermath. Lyndon Johnson was famous for arguing that the US leaving Vietnam would mean that communism would advance so much that "tomorrow we'll be fighting in Hawaii and next week San Francisco."[10]

To mitigate these concerns over the possibility of any subsequent regional instability, the withdrawing party has sought to maintain some geo-strategic influence; if it was not able to meet its strategic objectives with military force at the moment, it has opted to try to do so with other means in the near and long term. Governments leading previous withdrawals have explored such a possibility in a number of ways as they considered a total withdrawal. One common approach was to try to "indigenize" the ongoing war before disengaging so as to prevent instability of the country leading to interventions by neighboring states. Efforts were made to strengthen and empower local supporters to carry on the burden of the departing party. The French attempted to find "Arabs of a third force" who would maintain some form of French sovereignty in Algeria and to prevent the FLN from sweeping into power. "Vietnamization" was a way to bolster the South Vietnamese government and the Soviets sought "national reconciliation" in Afghanistan to build support for the communist backed Kabul government.[11] One broad, and yet specific measure, of a country's ability to stand on its own after disengagement was whether its own military forces could conduct independent military operations against irregular forces without assistance from the military forces of the superior power. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) proved capable of independent operations before the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and the Soviets were encouraged when the Afghan Army was able to score some defensive victories against the mujahedin in Jalabad in 1989.[12] Even though the South Lebanese Army (SLA) was to be disbanded under a UN resolution, the commanders of the SLA assured the Israeli government that it would stand and fight in the aftermath of an Israeli pullout.

Another way that withdrawing parties have attempted to maintain their geopolitical influence was to expand their deterrence posture in the region. In the cases of South Vietnam and southern Lebanon, decision makers attempted to renew deterrence efforts to include neighboring powers who were perceived as potential troublemakers. The Nixon Doctrine pledged that the US would protect its Asian allies against nuclear threats, but declared that in other cases of aggression that America would provide assistance and "look primarily to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense."[13] Similarly, although Israel would lose its defensive buffer when it withdrew from southern Lebanon, it could still maintain effective deterrence against Syria with the possession of Shab'a Farms while holding Lebanon responsible for attacks on Israel emanating from the former buffer zone. In fact, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak confided to a retired officer that he would use all the weapons in Israel's arsenal against anyone who attacked from Lebanon.[14]

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[10] Peter Merrill, Case Studies in the Termination of Internal Revolutionary Conflict, (Washington, DC: Advanced Research Projects Agency, 1967), 64.
[11] Sarah Mendelson, Changing Course, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 112.
[12] Alan Marshall, "Phased Withdrawal, Conflict Resolution and State Reconstruction", (United Kingdom: Conflict Studies Research Centre, Ministry of Defence, June 2006), 6.
[13] Henry Kissinger, The White House Years, (New York: Little and Brown, 1979), 35, 272. After the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, Nixon repeatedly promised the South Vietnamese that the US would come to its aid if the North violated the agreement.
[14] Fawaz Gerges, "Israel's Retreat from South Lebanon", Middle East Policy, (March 2001), 109.

Worries over Domestic Political Fallout

As the costs to national treasuries and the cost in human lives began to mount during the course of the wars in Algeria, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Lebanon, public support waned and opposition built. While domestic political opposition was part of the strategic calculations of many decision makers, they also grappled with their legacies and reputations; did they want to be remembered for not only losing a war that they were supposed to win while opening themselves to charges that they "lost" the country and possibly the region to further influence? During the war in Algeria, French historian Raymond Aron warned that the newly elected French government of Guy Mollet would be seen as weak and responsible for France"s decline as a European colonial power because if "Algeria is lost, and there is France on a slippery slope down which Spain and Portugal slid."[15] LBJ speculated that if he "lost" territory to communism, "Well, they"d impeach a President though that would run out, wouldn"t they?"[16] Kissinger explained to George McGovern that "we can"t do what you recommend and just pull out, because the boss"s whole constituency would fall apart….There would be a disaster, politically, for us here at home."[17] Yuri Andropov "already understood that it was necessary to reconsider this policy [of remaining in Afghanistan]….But he understood that it was very complicated. It touch[ed] the interests of the ruling elite and to come to this quickly in a definitive way was impossible."[18] As the Lebanon war deepened, Prime Minister Menachem Begin resigned without ordering a withdrawal of Israeli forces.

An important feature of contemplating a withdrawal has been for key decision makers to figure out how to assign blame for the initial intervention and thus the subsequent withdrawal. Such a tactic was used to blunt domestic criticism. In the case of Vietnam, the Nixon and Ford Administrations were able to argue that it was Congress who "lost" Southeast Asia to the communists through their constant obstructionism. Soviet decision makers were able to lay the blame for the intervention on members of Brezhnev"s inner circle.[19]

Tensions in Civil-Military Relations

Militaries have been generally hesitant to agree to a withdrawal after a long term investment in time, resources and troops. For them, disengagement means that there is no chance left for victory and the possibility of a tarnished reputation as an institution. Contemplating a withdrawal has had damaging effects on civil-military relations, in some cases, creating the impression among the ranks that politicians are pulling out the rug from under the military. For example, reports surfaced of disenchantment within the Soviet military as Geneva talks seemed to indicate a withdrawal date was finally being set.[20] The most extreme reactions came from the French military when it refused to obey civilian authorities in 1958 as accommodation with the FLN appeared imminent and in 1961 with the attempted coup by French military officers after DeGaulle voiced support for an "Algerian Algeria."[21]

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[15] Horne, 175.

[16] Transcript of telephone conversation, LBJ and Senator Richard Russell, 27 May 1964, in Michael Beschloss, ed., Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 369.

[17] Gerald Strober and Deborah Strober, Nixon: An Oral History of His Presidency, (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 171.

[18] Mendelson, 75.

[19] Alex Marshall, "Managing Withdrawal: Afghanistan as the Forgotten Example in Attempting Conflict Resolution and State Reconstruction", Small Wars and Insurgencies, (March 2007), 69.

[20] Rogers, 131.

[21] Horne, 422.

Conversely, political leaders have felt disappointed by the lack of results provided by the military, meaning that the crossroads between withdrawal or escalation and expansion is the fault of the military because it has been unable to prevail. Secretary of Defense McNamara expressed his frustration over the military"s failure in the wake of the Tet Offensive, "[W]e have no assurance that an additional 205,000 men will make a difference in the conduct of the war….There is no [military] plan to win the war."[22] When General Wheeler told LBJ"s inner circle that the US was not trying to win a military victory, Secretary of State Dean Acheson exploded, "Then what in the name of God are five hundred thousand men out there doing— chasing girls? This is not a semantic game, General; if the deployment of all those men is not an effort to gain a military solution, then words have lost all meaning."[23] Similarly, government minister Rafael Eitan was irritated by Israeli Chief of the General Staff Amnon Shahakin in 1997: "These words [i.e. that there is no military solution to the Lebanon problem] are likely to be interpreted as pressure by the military on the government, as though the IDF is tossing the problem over to the political branch and saying ,solve it…do as you wish, we have no solution."[24]

Ironically, clashes between civilian authority and military officers are also deepened after political leaders have given the military a freer hand to meet the strategic objectives. This is a common feature among the cases--national leaders have contemplated withdrawal more seriously following their nations" escalations, expansions and increased offensives. In many cases, like the US military in South Vietnam and the Red Army in Afghanistan, political leaders actually used the military as a "final push" to add to the calculus of disengaging. The "Christmas Bombings" and Operation Linebacker were as much designed to gain concessions from the North Vietnamese as they were to appease the South Vietnamese and "convince the hawks at home that the war had been ,won" in something like the traditional sense."[25] Gorbachev reportedly gave the military one more year to achieve victory, "to prove themselves" before he would order a withdrawal.[26]

Issues of Future Interaction with Post-Withdrawal State

Indigenization has been conceived for a number of purposes, one being, as Henry Kissinger put it, "to be a healthy interval" between a military departure and the ultimate fate of the post-withdrawal state.[27] To prolong this interval and to potentially build a state friendly to the withdrawing party"s interest, a departing power will seek to gain some concessions and agreements from its adversary and other antagonists in the region as ways to gauge whether a withdrawal is feasible. Talks with those who "could not be negotiated with" suddenly appear desirable—France negotiated with the FLN, the US with the North Vietnamese, the USSR with the mujahedin via Pakistan and the Israelis with the Syrians. The objective is linked with the hope that conditions in the country and in the region will not force a reinsertion of military force at a later date. Signaling his intent to bring Soviet troops home, Gorbachev promised to do so

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[22] Lloyd Gardner, <u>Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam</u>, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc, 1995), 436.
[23] Ibid., 454.
[24] Yoram Peri, <u>Generals in the Cabinet Room: How the Military Shapes Israeli Policy</u>, (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006), 84.
[25] Lloyd Gardner, "The Last Casualty? Richard Nixon and the End of the Vietnam War, 1969-1975", in Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco, eds., <u>A Companion to the Vietnam War</u>, (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 253.
[26] Mendelson, 102-103.
[27] Henry Kissinger, Draft Memo for the President (September 1971).

only when a political settlement was reached that would "reliably guarantee a non-renewal of the outside armed interference" in Afghanistan.[28]

Questions of moral obligations to those who previously worked with the withdrawing party did arise in calculations to disengage, but plans were often vague. Avi Yehezkel, chairman of the Knesset defense budget subcommittee during the months prior to the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, stated that "anyone who wants to leave [southern Lebanon] we should welcome with open arms. Otherwise we won't be able to look at ourselves in the mirror."[29] In the case of Algeria, there was no specific mention of the status of the *harkis* in Algeria under the Evian agreement, but were thought to be safeguarded by its general commitment to protect human rights.[30]

In the cases of South Vietnam and Afghanistan where the interventions were based on keeping their governments independent and self-governing, less consideration was given to those who worked alongside the withdrawing power. Making plans for a mass evacuation would have severely undercut the argument that these nations would be stable enough to remain viable in the aftermath of disengagement while at the same time providing the motivation for collaborators to begin to desert, defect and flee. Relying on Vietnamization, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger refused to design a strategy to extricate those Vietnamese and Cambodians who worked alongside the US.[31] Yet the chaotic final evacuation in South Vietnam was characterized by Kissinger as "fulfill[ing] the human obligation" toward those who had worked with the Americans.[32] The only plans made by the Soviet authorities were the distribution of special identity cards to leading members of the Afghani government in the event of an evacuation, but the vast majority was left to deal with the implications of "national reconciliation". [33]

Fears Realized, Worries Materialized?

The factors discussed are intertwined and cannot be easily separated. For example, Vietnamization was not solely designed as a way to maintain US influence within South Vietnam, it was also used to build a stable South Vietnam that would demonstrate American commitment to allies and adversaries as well as curtail domestic criticism. Civilian decision makers not only chose to escalate the conflict to appease the military leadership, but to ease domestic criticism before a withdrawal.

Although the factors were singly and in combination part of the calculations of the withdrawing party, were the concerns of decision makers and military leaders justified when they finally chose to withdraw? For example did predatory neighbors of the conflict seek to thwart attempts at a successful withdrawal and undermine efforts of the withdrawing party to leave with honor thereby stymieing the desire to maintain some geostrategic influence? Were the reputations of decision makers tainted by the withdrawal in the minds of their citizens and

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[28] Pravda, 26 February 1986, in Riaz Khan, <u>Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal</u>, (Lahore, Pakistan: Progressive Publishers, 1993), 146.

[29] Leslie Susser, "Israel Opens Compensation Talks with the SLA", <u>The Jerusalem Report</u>, 10 April 2000, 4.

[30] Martin Evans, "The Harkis: The Experience and Memory of France's Muslim Auxiliaries", in Martin Alexander, Martin Evans and J.F.V. Kieger eds., <u>The Algerian War and the French Army, 1954-1962: Experiences, Images, Testimonies</u>, (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan Ltd, 2002), 126.

[31] T. Christopher Jespersen, "Kissinger, Ford and Congress: The Very Bitter End in Vietnam", <u>Pacific Historical Review</u>, (August 2002), 442.

[32] Press Conference of Henry Kissinger, April 29, 1975.

[33] Tom Rogers, <u>The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan</u>, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 102.

domestic political rivals? The answers are mixed, suggesting that withdrawals turn out to be not as painless as advocates believed but also less painful than critics imagined.

Although issues of a nation"s international reputation were ever-present on the minds of national leaders who sought to preserve it by avoiding a withdrawal, many ended-up ironically choosing the option of quitting to *prevent* any further damage to their country"s standing in the world and continued distraction from other foreign policy goals. Charles DeGaulle who wanted to strengthen France"s position in Europe eventually acquiesced to the FLN"s demands. Nixon and Kissinger wanted Vietnam War settled "so that they could attend to other pressing diplomatic matters, including détente with the Soviet Union, tensions in the Middle East and the new relationship with China."[34] Similarly, the Soviet leadership felt that the ongoing Afghan war was an impediment to achieving renewed détente with the West.[35] In a seeming twist, the national reputation which suggested a successful outcome to the conflict became jeopardized by prolonging the war. For example, rather than reiterating the initial justification for an intervention into South Lebanon as self-defense, Israel"s Foreign Minister, David Levy explained that the continued presence of the IDF in southern Lebanon was untenable--"it legitimized attacks against Israel as an occupying force."[36]

Any message about the meaning of a withdrawal is largely interpreted by the receiver; the decision maker will not necessarily know how a withdrawal is understood and assessed by allies or adversaries until the next foreign policy issue arises. As such, forecasting the effects on international prestige is difficult since the decision maker is at the mercy of the actions and rhetoric of others at some indistinct future point in time. For example, in the cases examined, it is debatable whether the enemy was emboldened by the withdrawal. Predictably, the enemy"s rhetoric centered around the "defeat" and "humiliation" of the withdrawing party who is seen as a "paper tiger", but the withdrawing party"s narrative challenges such an interpretation. It is difficult to answer a subjunctive question: Would any future attacks not occur if the withdrawing party remained locked in its struggle? Certainly subsequent enemies have used a nation"s withdrawal in their rhetoric as evidence that the withdrawing party is weak—Al Qaeda routinely looked at the US departure from Somalia as part of their calculations to attack the US in an attempt to force it to withdraw from the Gulf region and Saddam Hussein saw the US experience in Vietnam as evidence that the US would not be able to withstand a high casualty rate. However, these instances were not the only explanations for the actions of America"s enemies in the early 21st century and any tarnished reputation or seeming lack of strategic resolve did not prevent allies from joining US coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the cases examined, national decision makers who initiated the conflict and worried about public opinion and their legacies, "failure was not an option". This might explain a common feature among these strategic withdrawals—the national leaders who decided to pull out their military forces were not the same ones who initially inserted them. New leaders were typically more immune from the rationale used to begin the war and from charges that they lost the war, especially if the war is being perceived as going badly by their core political constituency. In the USSR, key members of Gorbachev"s inner circle of reformers were

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[34] Jespersen., 442.

[35] Rogers, 4.

[36] Withdrawal from Lebanon: Press Briefing by Foreign Minister Levy, May 23, 2000. http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2000/Withdrawal+from+Lebanon-+Press+Briefing+by+FM+Levy htm

sympathetic to withdrawal and were able to isolate hardliners opposed to removing all Soviet forces from Afghanistan. In the cases of France, the US and Israel, public opinion shifted against their respective wars, permitting a freer contemplation of a withdrawal by decision makers. These leaders were able to change the vocabulary about disengagement. "Retreating, surrendering and losing" were replaced by phrases like "turning the page" or "staunching the bleeding".

However, even the ascension of pro-disengagement politicians into office did not end the national debate about what a withdrawal would entail; in the cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan, a type of "bidding war" occurred in the political arena where political allies urged a faster withdrawal. In the US during the withdrawal of combat forces from South Vietnam, newly elected politicians and newly appointed officials attempted to "outbid" those calling for a speedier withdrawal by pledging to bring home greater numbers of US troops ahead of the time tables they had initially proposed. Similarly, in 1986, Gorbachev wanted to speed up international negotiations on the Afghanistan war to "bring this to an end in short order" while his Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko went as far as to say that the USSR would accept Afghanistan as a *neutral* state if that terminated Soviet involvement more quickly.[37]

Indigenization efforts proved to be short-lived, even where they were coupled with a regional deterrence strategy. Not only did South Vietnam, and southern Lebanon ultimately fall into the hands of the adversary, their neighbors were not deterred from acting in a predatory fashion. North Vietnam toppled South Vietnam two years later, and with the support of Syria, Hizbollah swept into southern Lebanon and continued to harass northern Israel, prompting another Israeli incursion in the summer of 2006. Although the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan outlasted the USSR as a nation-state, it was still at the mercy of Pakistani and American designs. Algeria was a slightly different case since DeGaulle acquiesced to the FLN, granting Algerian independence while neighboring Tunisia and Morocco had already been granted independence.

When a time table for withdrawal was set without tying it to specific military and political conditions, false-starts have aggravated civil-military relations that were already strained during the anticipation and planning of the disengagement. As the withdrawal was occurring, leaders of armed forces argued to keep more combat power in theater to flexibly respond to actions of the adversary and prevent additional military and civilian casualties. Adding to the tension in civil-military relations, military officials were concerned about the safety of departing troops and sought to delay the redeployment of troops until "conditions were right." In South Vietnam, when combat forces were to be removed, General Earl Wheeler emphasized "the threat to US forces and the risk involved in force reductions."[38]

An additional complication arose in the cases of South Vietnam, Afghanistan and southern Lebanon--local leaders asked that the military slow its pace of departure to forestall enemy gains. The result was a more gradual process of withdrawal than the politicians" preferred time table. The *mujahedin* continued their operations despite treaty agreements,

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[37] Lester Grau, "Breaking Contact without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan", <u>Journal of Slavic Military Studies</u>, (April 2007), 239.
[38] Graham Cosmas, <u>MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal</u>, 1968-1973, (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 2007), 153.

forcing Moscow to pause the second phase of its withdrawal in late 1988 and "despite Gorbachev's impatience, almost half of the war would be fought under his leadership."[39]

When it came to the status of those who worked alongside the disengaging forces, no matter whether or not guarantees of safety were expressed by the withdrawing party or by groups who would potentially carry out reprisals, they suffered in the wake of departing forces. In Algeria, as the reprisal attacks and massacres occurred, DeGaulle was adamant that the *harkis* were not to be repatriated in France and went so far as ordering that those who arrived in France be returned and ordered the army not to intervene to stop the massacres.[40] In the frenzied evacuation of Saigon, few South Vietnamese collaborators were rescued while President Gerald Ford ordered naval vessels to remain off the Vietnamese coast to rescue refugees even though the North Vietnamese worked to prevent them from fleeing. With the dissolution of the USSR in the previous year, the fall of President Najibullah's regime in Afghanistan was treated with disinterest by Boris Yeltsin's Russian Federation. In his inauguration speech, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak promised "to take all necessary measure to guarantee the future of the Lebanese security and civilian personnel who have worked alongside over the years."[41] Yet with compensation and resettlement packages, the SLA and other collaborators were left largely to fend for themselves when the withdrawal actually occurred. Sadly, the choice of "suitcases or coffins" for collaborators is often made for them by the withdrawing party.[42]

Although the parameters of common concerns were present when considering a strategic withdrawal, these same parameters were used to assess the *operational withdrawal* when it was underway. The way in which the withdrawal was occurring and whether it was considered operationally successful were viewed as *strategically* critical. This should not be a surprise since the links between the operational and strategic levels of war are much tighter in irregular conflicts—and appear to continue to be so even when a withdrawal is underway. Concerns over international prestige still haunted the process of disengagement. After the Paris Peace Accords and facing the deterioration of the South Vietnamese government, Ford told his cabinet, "we apparently stand helpless, our fidelity in question, our word at stake."[43] US Ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham Martin went further by wanting to "arrange our leaving so that the manner of it would not add a further disgrace to the sad history of our involvement."[44] Ariel Sharon reacted to the chaotic scene during the IDF retreat from southern Lebanon by writing, "Israel's withdrawal caught our Lebanese allies by surprise. Who is going to trust us in the future….What message does this send to our allies in the region? The Palestinians and the Syrians alike view Israel's recent withdrawal as a sign of weakness."[45] The Soviet media attempted to put the best face on the mounting casualties among Red Army troops during the withdrawal: "In May 1945 when the Great Patriotic War [World War II] was coming to an end, the death of every soldier on the threshold of victory was a particularly painful event. A similar

[39] Ibid.
[40] Rogers., 127.
[41] Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt, eds., The Last Arab-Israeli Battlefield? Implications of an Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon, (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), 86.
[42] Horne, 480.
[43] Notes of the Cabinet Meeting, January 29, 1975, 1-2, 1975/01/29 Cabinet Meeting, box 4, James E. Connor Papers, GRF Library.
[44] Jespersen, 465.
[45] Ariel Sharon, "Leave Lebanon—but Not This Way", Wall Street Journal, 31 May 2000, A26.

situation, most likely, now exists in Afghanistan. Each new death will be especially grievous and distressing."[46]

The withdrawal itself also weighs heavily on the military when reprisal attacks have occurred; for the French military, the attacks undermined "the most basic failure of the mission, namely the protection of the population from attack."[47] In fact, civil authority over the military broke down in the departure from Algeria when many French troops assisted in the escape of thousands of *harkis* even though they were explicitly ordered not to do so by DeGaulle.

Domestic fallout over the manner in which the withdrawal occurred was affected by a number of the other parameters. For example, the treatment of collaborators as the withdrawal has occurred was greeted with mixed reactions within the withdrawing state. In France, the reaction was muted due to the general hardening of attitudes among the public who "wanted to turn the page as quickly as possible."[48] In Israel, public opinion was more sympathetic to members of the SLA who saw them as being "abandoned" by the IDF.[49] As such, many members of the SLA and their families were assisted by Israel with relocation to the US, Australia, Britain and Canada. Political opposition was also emboldened by the slow execution of an evacuation of a country"s nationals. As South Vietnam appeared on the verge of collapsing, Texas Democratic Congressman Jack Brooks complained about the "indecisiveness of the US Ambassador to Vietnam and the State Department in the face of this mounting threat to American lives."[50] The legacy and reputation of the decision maker also figures into how a withdrawal is perceived. In response to Ambassador Martin asserting that he would be the fall guy if the evacuation of Saigon went badly, Kissinger wrote, "My ass isn"t covered. I can assure you I will be hanging several yards higher than you when this is all over."[51]

Contemplating the Future in the Here and Now

The current debate over Afghanistan appears to be pulled towards issues of international prestige and regional instability as expressed in America"s objectives to defeat Al Qaeda and its allies as well as buttress the stability of Pakistan. Underlying this debate is an indigenization strategy to build Afghan institutions, particularly in the security arena, so that US and coalition forces can shift more responsibilities to Afghan security forces like the police and army. These may be the important parameters of the debate for now, but the other three factors of domestic political fallout, military melancholy and relations with a post-withdrawal Afghanistan will need examination if the debate about withdrawal is to be at its fullest.

Depending on the conditions in Afghanistan when a withdrawal is underway, it is unclear who in the US might be faulted for "losing". In order to maintain geostrategic influence in the region, at this stage, Iran and Al Qaeda in Iraq are not likely to be treated as reliable negotiating partners in any strategic calculation to withdraw. Tensions in civil-military relations may develop and become acute. Under the Obama Administration, the US military pursued a type of surge strategy to bring more forces into areas of Afghanistan that were under the threat of the

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[46] Rogers, 143.
[47] Evans, 128.
[48] Evans, 127.
[49] Tracy Wilkinson, "Pullout from Lebanon: Lebanese Militia Finds Sanctuary—but No Solace", <u>Los Angeles Times</u>, 24 May 2000, A1.
[50] Jespersen, 464.
[51] Ibid.

Taliban. Will this be treated by the Obama Administration, or a successive administration should Obama lose re-election in 2012, as a "final push" as in the other cases and will the US military resist the 2014 date if the Afghan security forces are not deemed strong enough to protect the state? Such resistance from the military might force the President to back away from his commitment or to overrule his generals.[52] Either scenario will cause a strain between civilian and military leaders.

To date, very little concern has been focused on the plight of those Afhan supporters of US and coalition efforts inside the country. Much like the cases of South Vietnam and Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the US strategy of building an Afghanistan that is stable, unified and at peace with its neighbors means that making any plans for the evacuation of collaborators would undermine the strategy itself. To make such plans would signal our allies and enemies in Afghanistan that we do not believe that it can survive without us. This, in turn, would lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy by instigating "defections" among pro-American leaders and citizens to the adversaries" camps, encouraging more violence among the various non-state armed groups in Afghanistan and even inviting interventions by regional powers.

The operational withdrawal, once underway, will also come under scrutiny. Planning for the day that the last American boot leaves Afghan soil needs to include the conditions under which such a departure might require a slower process. For example, what are the circumstances that US forces might delay implementing portions of the timetable for departure due to security risks to their troops or if Afghanistan itself appears to be coming apart and falling into civil war? How can the US prevent or manage a potentially chaotic withdrawal?

The tonic to alleviate these concerns is intimately linked with the larger strategic goal in Iraq which is still largely undefined. Does the US seek an Afghanistan that is a viable state with a friendly government or will the Obama Administration be content to muddle through with a version of "Afghan good enough"[53], meaning the best the Afghans can muster given the conditions of the day? If the objective is to leave an Afghanistan that is viable as a state, then a chaotic withdrawal under fire may require an articulation of a set of parameters that would require an American "re-intervention" in Afghanistan. Such an articulation may not be necessary if the objective is "Afghan good enough"; a chaotic withdrawal under such a scenario, however, would seem to validate the pessimistic visions contained in each of the five concerns examined.

If the past is prologue, the debate over withdrawing from Afghanistan will become even more wrenching for national leaders, military officials and the American public as more months are added to the years that have been already fought in the country. Withdrawing has serious consequences for all who are involved in fighting an irregular conflict. For the withdrawing party that possessed a superior military and was thought to be able to quickly prevail, the words of an Israeli commentator during the IDF"s departure from southern Lebanon offer a caution— "We too learned that there are no happy withdrawals, no free withdrawals."[54] The process of the US military"s withdrawal from Afghanistan and how it unfolds are serious and require an understanding of what the short and long term implications might be. As Jean Bethke Elshtain powerfully asks: "having gotten things so wrong during the evacuation of South Vietnam, will

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[52] Elisabeth Bumiller and Thom Shanker, "Generals Propose a Timetable for Iraq", New York Times, 18 December 2008, 25.
[53] Larry Kaplow, "The Last Day of the Iraq War", Newsweek, 12 January 2009, http://www.newsweek.com/id/177717
[54] Wilkinson.

the United States get things any more right this time?"[55] After all, decision makers in the future will likely use withdrawal from Afghanistan in their imaginings of what a potential disengagement from their particular conflict might entail. But, then again, that is another sandwich….

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[55] Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Ethics of Fleeing: What the US Still Owes Iraq", <u>World Affairs</u>, (Spring 2008), 92.